

My Room

Yashoda

At night, having spent yet another day of my life, when I lie down on this bed, I feel there is no one closer to me than it is. Because during the day there are many things I can do, many people with whom, so as to maintain a relationship, I have to spend, if not much, then a little time. Because according to me if one does not invest time in relationships, the feelings of intimacy weaken. But when I lie on my bed, there is nothing else for me to do. Just me, my bed, remembrances of things past, thoughts related to these memories, questions related to these thoughts. Questions to which I sometimes find answers, but in which, at other times, I get completely entangled. Then I think that to find an answer to every question is not necessary. Because when we seek answers to our own or others' questions, we find ourselves face to face with many more questions related to these answers.

But however things may be, this bed of mine enfolds me in itself for ten hours, or you could say I enclose myself in the bed for ten hours. And this is my dear pillow, in which are hidden so many of my pearls which brim over from my eyes because of some deep thought of mine, and flow into it. Anyone else may not know the flavour of my tears, but my pillow recognises their taste.

When in silence I lie down, laying my own self beside me on the bed, voices from all around melt into my ears like pebbles in water. It seems as if water fills me from my ears to my brain. And one by one the pebbles (that is the voices) pass through my ears and file into my brain. When I put my mind to this whirlpool of sounds, sometimes I find myself standing far away, and sometimes confined to immediate surroundings.

When the sound of a fast moving car's horn reaches me, all my attention shifts, racing to the road. But then the sounds of my mother's

snores draw me towards them, as my mother sleeps with me. When the sound of songs comes from the neighbouring house, my heart sways with abandon. But the sounds of fighting from the lane behind dampen this joyful feeling. From among these, the softest sounds of someone speaking compel me to pay attention, thinking perhaps that what they are talking about is important. But when the cat jumps heavily, making a crashing sound on our impermanent roof, thought withdraws from all else and comes to a stop inside the house. Sometimes these sounds are exciting. But sometimes, listening to these sounds, I feel like I am standing at the threshold of madness.

At this moment, the sounds are becoming fewer, and it is really windy. Usually in February the weather is not very cold. But for some reason this year the cold refuses to go away. There has been a slight drizzle since this morning. When the fast moving wind shakes up the tarpaulin and the leaves, and they move with the wind and create sounds, I really like it. Because these sounds are rarely heard otherwise. The other sounds are an everyday occurrence. But these sounds bring with them the cold, changing weather, and memories of past moments. I think that because these sounds are produced by the fluttering of the wind, they create vibrations in our hearts as well. Everyday sounds, on the other hand, seem to run in our bodies along with our blood, and their existence is not felt separately.

Sometimes a loud sound produces some fear in our hearts, but only briefly. There are so many sounds, so many voices inside my heart, and without. But in the house, there is stillness. That's because everyone is sleeping. But the three of us are awake – me, my bed, and the thoughts in my brain. In this deep moment of thoughtful silence, there is one thing I can hear clearly. And that is the tick-tick heartbeat of my watch.

The white of the walls is shining, because the bulb is burning bright. That's the effect of the high voltage at this time. During the day, the bulb covers in front of my eyes. But right now, I am not able to see

eye to eye with it. Because it is beaming so.

A little below the bulb, on a shelf, is our television. Many shadows can be seen in it, and it seems as if despite being switched off, there is a whole new world settled in the television. A world in which everything is coloured in the same colour, without differences – of sounds, of voices, or of thought.

The wind has entered with such force from the chinks in our walls, that a shiver has run through my whole body. The upper half of my body is outside the quilt, and the wind is entering from the sides of the quilt as well. The wind comes and makes me aware of its coldness. Sometimes everything seems like routine. After the night, day; after the day, night. Just like a drain with boundaries on either side which can never meet, and water that runs through the middle, which never stops. Just like your life and my life. Never mind! That is how I think. But maybe you will think differently.

I turn my head a little and see my mother's saree hanging on the wall. There was no sunshine today. So Lakshmi has hung it inside the house to dry. Although I don't think this to be a special saree, today it is looking like an orange cloud with a golden swing embroidered in it. I am the only one swinging on it. My hair is blowing in the wind, gracefully. The fragrance of shampoo wafting from my hair has spread over the cloud, and I am filling my lungs with fresh air. But mother's snores become loud and swallow even my imaginings. And I feel like going and sleeping on the top of the Qutub Minar, where no one would disturb me. But then I get scared of the loneliness there.

Now you will ask why? Because... You search for the answer to this question yourselves. You will find a better answer from your own thoughts, in your own words.

My back is really hurting now. So I should lie down a while. *Arre*, what is this? The whitewash on the walls of our house is just like the pair

of lips of a woman who has put lipstick on one of her lips, but not on the other. Because the walls are whitewashed, but not the roof. The wooden planks on the roof are looking different today. Maybe I am paying far too much attention to them. It seems as if, like human beings, they are of different colours – black, fair, dark, etc. And images are emerging from these planks because of water from the rain. Many look like faces of people I know. But many frightening faces are scaring me. It's very late as well. It's two at night. Perhaps these faces are taking advantage of the time and dominating over me. I will not look towards the roof now. But now I'm finding it impossible to even look at the notebook! And my whole body is hurting. It can't speak, the poor thing. So it is hurting and making its tiredness felt.

It's very late. I really must lie down now. Because if my bed gets annoyed, my body will not get any rest. OK then, I'm going to lie down in my soft bed. So everyone, Goodnight.

Telephone

Naseem Bano

There is a workshop next to our house. When our house was still *kuchcha* (impermanent), the workshop got a telephone connection. Two to three days after that, *Bhai jaan* got us a connection in our house. Our telephone was black in colour, and used to shine brightly. Two or three months later, the *amma* with the cat next door also got a connection. I liked the ring of our phone more than either of theirs. Our ring was really loud, nice to hear. I didn't like the ring of the *amma* with the cat. Whenever I would hear hers ring, I would feel like picking up the telephone from the table and throwing it on the ground. And when the phone used to ring in the workshop next door, they would take very long to pick up the receiver. Only after six to seven rings. They had a telephone connection, so they really showed off.

And in our house, when the phone bell would ring, everyone in the

house would rush towards it. *Ammi* and Rani *Baji* would be the first to run, but if they would take time to climb the *takht*, Sayra would pick up the phone. Then, if I would be sitting near the phone, I would pick up the receiver.

When we first got the telephone, we didn't know the phone number. *Bhai* said we should keep a diary and a pen near the phone. When we get a call from the telephone exchange and they tell us the number, we should quickly note it down. On the fourth day when the call came, I was sitting on the *takht* doing my schoolwork. I picked up the receiver on the second ring. When I said "Hello", some man asked for Sharif, "Is this Sharif's house?" I said it was. He said the telephone had been installed in Sharif's name. I said, "No, it's on my father's name". I had only said this much when he hung up. I had received a call for the first time and my hands and feet were cold. I felt weird speaking on the phone.

When *Bhai* came, he asked if there had been any call. I said someone had called, but he didn't tell me the phone number. He didn't say anything and went out. Next day *Bhai* went to the exchange and found out the number and came home and told us.

The first person we gave the number to was our *Baji*, who has been married into a house in Seelampur. And I called up Chandrakanta *Didi* and told her as well. And the neighbours who had telephone connections as well. Then calls kept coming. Don't know how everyone else in the neighbourhood got to know our number. There would be calls from so many people. *Baji* also got herself a connection. When she would feel lonely, she would call us. We would also call her and speak with our nephew.

One day, Rani *Baji* dialled 161 and put the receiver down. When the phone rang, *Ammi* picked up the receiver and said hello. We had such a laugh over that. I told my friend Nazmeen. She also recounted a story from her house. They were all watching television, and *Bhai* was sit-

ting on the chair smoking a *bidi*. Just as we call our father *Chacha*, she calls hers *Bhai*. A phone rang in some serial on the television, and *Bhai* quickly threw his *bidi*, picked up the receiver and said "Hello". This had really tickled Nazmeen.

When relatives, guest and people from the neighbourhood started making calls from our phone, the bill really increased. So *Bhai jaan* got a telephone box made and put a small lock on it. It had two keys, one of which *Bhai* kept, and the other he gave to *Ammi*. He said to tell anyone who came to make a call that the keys were with him, or that we didn't know where they were, that Salman must have lost them, that we couldn't find them. We hid the key in the cup. But somehow everyone knew where they were and whoever wanted to make a call would take the key out of the cup!

My mother's younger sister's husband had come from Muradabad to work here. And if had to make a call, and would find the telephone box locked, he would just ask us for a screwdriver, open the box and make his call.

When *Chacha* had a heart attack, it was late one night, around 1:30 or 2:30 a.m. We called up *Baji* at Seelampur, so she would come immediately. When we had got the connection, *Bhai*, who is quite frugal, had complained that it was an unnecessary expenditure. "Why can't you just go to a phone booth and make a call?" When we gave our phone number to his in-laws, and there would be a call from there every other day, we couldn't say anything to *Bhai*, but we'd say to *Ammi*, "So now it's ok to have a phone, isn't it!" *Ammi* wouldn't say anything, she'd keep quiet.

Bhai jaan would pay all the phone bills. He would take care of the household expenses, and also pay the instalments for his vehicle. Then things turned for the worse, and *Bhai* had to stop running his vehicle for months. Meeting daily household expenses was getting difficult. Telephone bills kept piling up. We couldn't pay, and the phone was disconnected.

We had the phone for around two and a half years. After it got disconnected, we gave everyone our neighbour's phone number so they would still be able to contact us. This was my friend Nazmeen's house. They would tell us if our relatives, or anyone else called. And they'd say we could also make calls from there, but we used a public phone booth. After all, how long can you call from someone else's house without eventually irking them?

When there was the fire in the *basti*, our house was also gutted in it. The phone also got burnt in that fire. We didn't even have money to call up *Baji*. From a burnt box *Ammi* found 42 one-rupee notes. She gave me two rupees to call *Baji*. We called Zaibun *Khala's* house. It was six in the morning, everyone was sleeping and we got worried that we'd end up with two calls instead of one. Then *Dulha Bhai* came. We told him to come and take *Chacha* with him, or on seeing the condition of the house he would have another heart attack, and replaced the receiver. I remember we were at *Baji's* house when *Bhai* had got divorced, and *Dulha Bhai* had informed us on the phone.

After the fire, we didn't get a connection. When *Chacha* had a heart attack the last time, we made calls from *Khala's* house to inform our relatives. And then when he died, it was through the phone again that we got in touch with them. After the fire, when our house was rebuilt, no one spoke even once of getting a phone connection.

The Clock

Babli Rai

On Tuesday night, I was thinking about what I would like to write on. I was also watching TV, and also thinking of an object that hadn't been moved for many days, and was unlikely to be moved in the near future. Many things came to my mind. For instance, TV, photos, fan, wall, door. But I didn't think about them further because they didn't trigger my imagination. I let these questions be, and watched TV. The film *Prithvi*,

starring Sunil Shetty and Shilpa Shetty, was playing. But I didn't like the film, and turned my head away and tried to sleep. I don't know when I fell asleep. I got up in the morning.

My eyes first fell on the clock. It showed 7:00 o'clock. I got up and went to Swati. Swati is a five-month-old girl. She is dark-skinned, her eyes are big, nose flattened, forehead broad. She looks just like a boy. And whenever she sees someone talking, she starts laughing, all on her own. I'm her aunt, her mother's sister. After playing with her and making her laugh, by 7:30, I went to the public toilet to shit. This toilet is near our house. Whatever time you go there, there is usually always a crowd...

After reaching home, I opened the door and my eyes fell on the wall clock. I quickly washed my hands and came inside. The clock is clearly visible from the door. It's not very big. It has Roman numbers written in it. Its colour is chocolate brown, but the exterior has a black net-like design. The clock has an interesting story.

Earlier, we had a wristwatch at home, but no clock. We used to keep asking Papa to get us one, but he wouldn't. Then, four years ago, he got this one and showed it to all of us. I asked Papa where he had got it from, and for how much. Papa said he had found it in the scrap he deals in. It wasn't working, and I pointed this out to him. He said, "Silly girl! It doesn't have any cells! Would anyone throw a functional clock in the garbage?"

Papa put cells in it, and it started working. It still is. I had said to him then, "Good that you found a clock, because you would never have bought one". But when I started thinking about the clock, I had many questions. Looking at it, I also remembered another watch, a wristwatch which would tell the time only when tied on the wrist. As soon as you would take it off, it would stop. Seeing its erratic behaviour, Papa had gone and sold it for ten rupees.

I asked Papa if he could think about the life of the clock before it got

here, to us. Can you think about that time? Papa said, "This is not a human being which will have a life. It's lifeless". I said I was sure it had a life. Maybe it was made in a good shop by a skilled artisan. And maybe after getting made, when it started showing time, it was proud that people depended on it for accurate time. And then maybe someone who needed it bought it for Rs. 150 or 200, but when it stopped working threw it in the garbage. But by putting cells in it, we started its life again.

Street Lamp

Bobby Khan

On a Saturday evening at 6:00 pm, Seema was sitting on the roof of her house reading a book. Across from her, Raju was sitting on his roof looking at her. Raju wanted to speak with Seema. He cleared his throat to catch her attention. Hearing him, Seema looked up from the book, at him. Raju gestured with his eyes, asking Seema what she was reading. Seema turned the book over to show him the cover. On reading the name of the book, Raju started to laugh and went downstairs.

Seema kept sitting on the roof, reading. Meanwhile Raju also came up to her roof. He covered Seema's eyes with his hand. Seema got scared and said, "Asha, remove your hand!" Raju immediately removed his hand, laughed and said, "You're so lost in your book that you didn't even realise if it was Asha or Raju!" Seema said, "You're mad". Raju said, "Seema, do you do anything other than reading books? Whenever I see you, you're reading this boring *Mehakta Aanchal!*"

Seema's mother called out to her. Hearing her voice, Seema quickly went downstairs. Seema's mother said to her, "Seema, knead some dough". Seema said, "I was enjoying reading the book so much. Your voice spoilt that!" Her mother said, "Leave your book for some time and prepare the dough". Seema picked up a large earthenware bowl, and started to knead. Her younger sister was watching TV and her

mother was cooking in the kitchen. It must have been 6:30 pm.

While Seema was kneading the dough, the electricity went. Her sister went out and Seema was left alone. She called out to her mother, "Mummy, the light's gone, could you come here and light the lamp?" After lighting the lamp, her mother said, "You're taking so long! So much work could have been done in this much time". As soon as her mother finished speaking, Seema said, "It's done".

Seema went back up on the roof. There is a street lamp next to the roof, so light is never a problem. There is a *peepul* tree between the roof and the street lamp. When light from the street lamp falls on the leaves of the tree, their colour is fascinating to see. It seems that sunlight is cutting through the leaves towards us and is taking us away from the darkness. Seema sat down to read in the light of the street lamp.

While reading, her eyes wandered to the wall in front of her. The street lamp spread its light there. A boy was standing with a child on another roof. The shadows of the boy, the child and the leaves of the tree fell on the wall. Seema lifted her hand to see if its shadow would fall on the wall. Seeing the shadow, she thought, "Why don't I stand with my book?" Seema stood up on the roof, book in her hand. Her whole body made a shadow on the wall. Seema would sit, then stand, then sit and raise just her hand. She felt happy.

Her father called out for her, "Seema, give me my shoes, quickly". She rushed downstairs and started looking for his shoes. Her father asked, "Have you found them?" She said, "Not yet, Papa". He said, "Where are you looking for them? Look under the almirah, they must be lying there".

So instead of looking here and there, Seema looked under the almirah. She muttered to herself, "God only knows where the wretched shoes have gone and slept! They are not under the almirah". Meanwhile,

her mother came from outside and asked what she was looking for. She told her, and her mother said, "The shoes aren't under the almirah, but inside them, in a polythene bag". Seema tried to open the almirah, but couldn't because there was a lock on its door. So she asked her mother where the keys were. Her mother said, "Look in the cup, they're kept in it".

Seema took the keys out of the cup and opened the lock to the almirah. She started looking for the shoes in the lower shelf. She saw the shoes, lying in the polythene bag. Seema quickly took them out and gave them to her father, saying, "Papa, here are your shoes". Her father put on the shoes and went out.

Seema's mother took the lamp and went out. Darkness settled comfortably in the house. Seema said, "Now Mummy has gone out with the lamp. I wish the electricity would come back". She went out of the house. As soon as she stepped out, electricity returned. Happily, Seema switched the TV on. A song from the film *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* was playing on the TV. It was, "The sun of sadness has faded, the moon has started to shine". Seema was sitting comfortably, lost in the song. Children from the neighbourhood came and started making noise in front of her house. Seema couldn't follow the song amidst their yelling. She went to the door and said, "Come on, all of you, go back to your own houses and make noise there". Still noisy, they started to move ahead. As they moved, their sounds faded.

By the time Seema had chased the children away, the song had finished. Annoyed with the children she started muttering, switched the TV off and sat down to eat. After eating, she went and lay down on the roof next to her mother. She thought, "If I hadn't found the keys, how would I have opened the locked?" She said to her mother, "Good that you came home and told me where the keys were. Otherwise Papa would have scolded me. The shoes were lying comfortably in the almirah. It would have been so great if shoes and almirahs could speak like us! So, when I was looking for the shoes, the almirah could have told

me, 'They are inside me'. I would have opened it and the shoes would have told me exactly where they were".

The Cable

Dhirender Pratap Singh

I remember a little about the time we had a black & white television. That was in 1994. Cable must have just about started when we bought the TV. Maybe at that time I didn't even have enough sense to think about getting a cable connection. The television used to be kept in a room on the first floor of the house.

Once, I was sitting alone watching it. At the time B&W televisions didn't have remote controls, but perhaps now they do. Sitting all by myself, I thought why not twist the television's ears and change channels. Thought to myself that just like the transistor catches radio and FM waves, maybe the television will catch some cable channels. Twist by twist, I reached one such channel which was showing a film. I thought why not try and move the wire around a little to see if the image clears a little more. But the image didn't change. I thought something must be done so I can watch cable. The cable-guy's satellite was just five steps away. The wires were tied to an electricity pole in front of the house. All that separated me from them were the electricity wires tied to the pole, and the breadth of the lane. I cast a glance at the rooftops in the market. People had tied a speaker, the rim of a cycle and a magnet to the antennae on their roofs.

I thought, something has to be done. I went to the scrap shop in my lane and bought a cycle rim. Then, went up to my roof, removed the wire from the antenna and tied it to the cycle rim. Back downstairs to the TV, I saw that the cable (transmission) was clear. When Mummy came back from her vegetable shopping, she was surprised to see a new movie on television. She asked me, "There is a new film on the television?" I said I made it happen with my brain. Mummy said, "What did

you do?" I told her to go up and see for herself. I was sitting downstairs, watching the film. Mummy quietly went up and removed the rim from the antenna. I thought maybe there is some problem from the main transmission. Mummy came back down and said, "Go return this rim to wherever you got it from". I asked her why she had removed it. Mummy said, "When your father returns from duty today, we'll get a cable connection". I replied with an "Okay".

Papa came back in the evening. I asked him to get a cable connection. He said we'd get it done the next day. But I was restless for cable. I sneaked Raju into the house and started to think about a new plan.

And this is what I did – I took the TV antenna wire, removed the insulation, and pulled out the strands of wire one by one. I told Raju, "I'll keep peeling off the insulation, you keep winding it up". Two hours passed. We estimated the length of the wire would be enough to reach across now. I said to Raju, "You go stand on the roof opposite, and throw two small stones from the window".

I was on the second floor, and just below me was the electricity wire. Raju threw in the stones. I tied the wires I had peeled, the thickness of which was microscopic, to these stones. Then I threw them across. But they got entangled in my hand and landed straight on the electricity wires. The shock I got then! For a second I thought I was dead and gone to heaven. But I didn't relent, and threw the wire once again. Raju was quick. He caught them and quickly swung up his arms. I ran up to that roof, and simply tied the wires to the joint in the cable. I came back to find the transmission was smooth and clear.

Next day, Papa said, "Get a cable connection today". I thought, who wants to give a hundred and fifty rupees every month. I said, "Let it be. What's the need?"

Ram at School

Lakhmi Chand Kohli

This is the story about a boy who loves working with electrical appliances. He could fix everything that didn't work, and ruin everything that did. He was dark and tall.

Ram. Let me tell you about Ram. Ram's full name was Ram Vilas. He was the monitor of our class. Though he was a good friend of mine, he was very strict about his responsibilities. He used to reach school by one pm, and he really liked shaking hands with everyone. He always came in uniform. In class, sometimes he would joke around, and sometimes sit absolutely quiet. One day (it was 2:30 in the afternoon) it was very hot. Everyone was really troubled by it. And the fan over our desk was moving really slowly. We had two fans in our classroom. The second fan was right behind our seat. That was also moving slowly. Ram came and said –

Ram: *Yaar* Lakhmi, it's really hot. What should we do? We'll die if this continues.

I said: You're right, *yaar*. And this fan! Look how fast it moves.

Rakesh: *Abbe yaar*, you know how to work with electrical things. Why don't you do something to fix the fan?

(At that time, only Ram, Rakesh and I were sitting there. The rest of the students were sitting at the back, singing songs. I don't know what happened to Ram that he shot up and said to Rakesh –)

Ram: *Abbe yaar*, what have you reminded me of? Come with me. Lets fix this fan.

I said: Oh man! Don't do anything such that we lose even what we have!

Ram: This is exactly what I hate. Now that I am fixing the fan, look at what he is saying.

Rakesh: *Oye*, you keep your trap shut. Just sit there and see how the fan moves faster.

(And both of them went into the staff room and took out a condenser from one of the fans. Back in the classroom, they showed it to me.)

Ram: Now see how the fan spins.

(And both of them climbed on to the desk and started to fix the condenser in the fan. Now all the boys were with us. Everyone was supporting them. Standing there, they were saying to one another, "*Yaar*, lets see. If their fan moves faster then we'll fix ours as well". Some were saying, "*Oye*, be careful. You'll die, you'll die!" They were just kidding. Now the condenser was in place in the fan and Ram had climbed down.)

Ram: Now see, son, how fast your fan moves!

I said: Yes, yes, lets see.

(When he switched the fan on, it moved quite fast. Everyone was beaming and looking at Ram. Then –)

I said: Very good, my hero. I salute you, boss. Now just let it rotate! But where did you get the condenser?

Ram: I'll tell you on condition you don't tell anyone else. I took it out from one of the fans in the staff room.

I said: But now that fan?

Ram: Now that fan will never move.

(Now suddenly he had another brain wave. He said, "I can make it work even faster". The same question escaped everyone's lips, "How?" Then –)

Ram: If we put in one more condenser, the fan will move even faster.

I said: *Abbe yaar*, let it be, this is fine. We don't want to ruin it.

Ram: Oh no, why don't you just relax!

I said: But where will you get the other condenser?

Ram: The fans in the staff room are not yet extinct. There are still many more fans.

(So he took Rakesh with him and again went towards the staff room. Within five minutes, he had brought a condenser and he started fixing it in the same way he had before. Then, on finishing, he said –)

Ram: Now watch how this fan leaves even the fourth gear behind.

(And he switched the fan on. The fan moved really fast, and happiness lit up all the boys' faces. But a little while later there was a huge explosion in the fan and the fan left us forever. Now all the boys were looking at Ram and laughing loudly. Some even playfully abused him.)

Ram: *Abbe yaar*, what a scene! Never mind, we'll attend to this in the evening.

I said: Yes of course. First we replaced the condenser, now we'll replace the fan.

All the boys: But from where?

I said: There is a fan in the library that can remove the heat for us!

Ram: Which one? I understand!

I said: You have understood, haven't you! This must be done in fifteen minutes after school ends. Ok?

(After some time, school ended. We removed our fan and went to the library, took off the fan that was right above the teacher's chair and fixed it in our classroom. Then we went home. The next day when we switched the fan on, it moved really slowly.)

Ram: *Abbe yaar*, this moves so slowly. What if we increase the speed?

I said: Oh brother, let it be. It's fine the way it is. And just think about what will happen when sir realises the fan doesn't work.

(And everyone laughed, clapping their hands. And we didn't even bother to find out what the sir's condition was in the library.)